The *Final Fantasy*/Frontier: Digital Colonization & Cyber-nationalism in *Final Fantasy XI.*

Evan W. Lauteria
Syracuse University
Cultural Foundations of Education
350 Huntington Hall
Syracuse, NY 13244 USA
+1 (315) 443-3343
ewlauter@syr.edu

Abstract:
Final Fantasy XI is a massively-multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), first released in Japan in 2002 and later in the United States in 2003. Sporting a massive subscriber base of over 500,000 by the release of its fourth expansion pack in 2007, *Final Fantasy XI* offers players intriguing stories to unfold, vibrant regions to explore, and a variety of activities to play. These stories, regions, and activities, however, need to be analyzed with a critical eye; among the primary features of *Final Fantasy XI* are its narratives of war, territorial expansion, and global competition. For the 500,000+ players of *Final Fantasy XI*, what impact do these narratives have? What discourses construct the spaces in which gamers meet and play? What lessons are they taught through *Final Fantasy XI*'s gameplay mechanics? This paper will take a look at the narratives, spaces, and mechanics of *Final Fantasy XI*, wherein players become direct agents of nationalistic and colonial efforts between a triad of politically competing nation-states. By looking at the narratives of the hot- and cold-wars of *Final Fantasy XI*'s in-game world of Vana'diel and the in-game mechanics of "Conquest," this paper aims to explore potential implications of a growing gamer citizenry armed with cyber-colonial experiences and memories in light of U.S.-Japan relations and the militarization of civilian lives.

Keywords:
MMORPG, colonization, militarization, game studies, procedural rhetoric

The history of video games is one of cross-cultural exchange. It is a history rooted in the communication, political ties, and economic transactions of, in large part, Japan and the United States. This history of exchange, however, is not one of equally bidirectional exchange; rather, the history of video game production, marketing, and dissemination is linked to the history of the U.S. occupation of Japan in the wake of World War II and the American colonization of the collective Japanese psyche that followed.

This pseudo-colonial history has led authors like Johan Höglund (2008), Leigh Schwartz (2006), and Elmer Tucker (2006) to launch a critical analysis of representation, narrative, and "the other" in gaming through the lens of Edward Said's (1979) pivotal work, *Orientalism*. Tucker's work, for instance, guides us through the Western consumption of Japanese games like the *Onimusha* (Capcom, 2001-2006) and *Tenchu* (Acquire, et. al., 1998-2009) series, showing us how particular representations of "Japanese-ness" are packaged, marketed, and commodified for Western consumption.

Mia Consalvo (2007) calls for a complication of these analyses, though, by arguing that "Japanese and American individuals, businesses and government have interacted with one another in more complicated ways than the dominant/subordinate roles of European and Middle Eastern countries that Said details." (740). She instead sees a more complex interaction between Japan and the United States, one with a rich history of cultural exchange tracing back to "before the purported official opening of Japan to the West in the 1850s" (737). She makes the claim that the histories of Japanese-U.S. relations combined with the distinct localization practices of game marketing and manufacture create less of an "orientalist" gaming culture and more of a "hybridic" one. She sees the exchange between Japan and the U.S. as far closer to an even playing ground, arguing that "a traditional colonizer/colonized relationship does not apply, apart from a (relatively) brief period occupation following the Second World War" (740).

Regardless of whether or not you believe video games can or should be analyzed through a post-colonial lens or a lens of equal economic exchange, the methods by which both of these approaches are utilized is limiting. That is, analyses employing an *Orientalism* approach, and Consalvo's critical inquiries "Is Mario Orientalist? Is Link?" (2007, 740), only examine the representational aspects of games. Though we can potentially learn something useful about Japanese-U.S. relations through depictions of the Samurai, Ninja, etc. – and, in fact, the Japanese business notion of 土着化 (*dochakuka*) or "glocalization" (Connell, 2007) hints that there is something both intentional and subconscious happening in Japan's representational export practices – we only see one piece of the postcolonial puzzle if we limit our analysis to the visual aspects of video games.

So, instead, I am asking we pull from Ian Bogost's (2007) notion of procedural rhetoric for a method of analysis that might better seize the postcolonial complexity of games. Launching from his idea of procedural rhetoric – that the very process by which something is completed has persuasive power – we can better acknowledge that game mechanics and game images are never fully separate for the gamer. And so I turn to what I think are the colonizing procedural rhetorics of Conquest, Beseiged, and Campaigns in *Final Fantasy XI*, which, I argue, attempt to persuade the player that the seizing of land, the control of regions, and the slaughter of others are fun and integral to personal well-being.

Final Fantasy XI (Square Co., Ltd., 2003) is a "Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG), which reached a subscription base of over 500,000 active players by the release of its fourth expansion pack in 2007.[1] *Final Fantasy XI* players meet and engage with the narrative and game mechanics through the virtual lands of Vana'diel, an expansive world inhabited by diverse species of animals, plants, and sentient humanoids. The game divides these humanoids into two major categories, which distinguishes "the good guys" from the bad. The AI-controlled "Beastmen" include creatures like Orcs, bird-like Yagudo, and turtle-like Quadav. The player, on the other hand, can choose to be one of the five "children of Altana," the seemingly "good" races of the world Humes, Galka, Elvaan, Mithra, and Tarutaru.

[1] Information based on an interview with Hiromichi Tanaka <http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news_index.php?story=15400>, accessed on November 4, 2010. A similar statistic, based on a less-precise "fanon" belief, is that there are approximately 15,000-20,000 subscribers for each of the 32 game servers.

As part of the character creation system, which includes choosing one's race, gender, facial features, and role in combat, players choose a country of origin and affiliation. From the start, players become "digital citizens" within a triad of political powers:

- The medieval Kingdom of San d'Oria, which reflects a European Catholic theocratic monarchy
- The industrial Republic of Bastok, which reflects an industrial American representative democracy, and
- The shamanistic Federation of Windurst, an ambiguously Asian "State Shinto" shamanic oligarchy

These countries, too, reflect the histories of their "real world" counterparts. San d'Oria views the proverbial and geographic south as intellectually and spiritually inferior. Bastok suffers from segregation and racism between Humes and Galka. Windurst is forced to negotiate with "the enemy" to maintain some form of sovereignty.

Examining these representational and narrative aspects of the game, however, tell an incredibly small portion of the story. As players become digital citizens, they too become agents of their country's colonial, imperial, and warlike activities. Following the in-game history of the Crystal War, the children of Altana are locked in combat with the Shadowlord's hordes of Beastmen. The three countries a player can join are neighbored by opposing Beastmen strongholds, which appear more "primitive" than their player-inhabited counterparts. These strongholds ensure that there is a steady supply of Beastmen for players to encounter, even early on in the game. Beastmen are infamous among players for what is referred to in-game as "enmity" or "aggro," which describes non-player-character (NPC) artificial intelligence that seeks out and attacks nearby player characters (PC). As fledging characters, players will most likely die at some point at the hands of these Beastmen. And so begins the divide. Beastmen are labeled as "other" – non-communicative, bloodthirsty, and a danger to the safety of players and their kin – a mythology supported by experience in combat.

While the battles with Beastmen connote a "hot war" just outside the city walls, a less-visible "cold war" exists between the three countries of San d'Oria, Bastok, and Windurst. The countries are locked in a competition for resources, land, and political control, which players can witness through in-game mechanics like Conquest, text-based interaction with non-player characters of various countries, and narrative-driven quests and missions. Battling with Beastmen and working against opposing countries become state-sanctioned as the player progresses through their countries' "missions." As part of their national affiliations, players are expected to serve their countries through "missions," and these missions include a variety of tasks, from delivering packages to regional outposts to looting slaughtered bodies of nearby Beastmen. As players complete these missions, their rank as citizens increases, which grants players access to additional weapons, armor, modes of transportation, etc. to continue progressing through the game.

These three discourses – the ever-present danger of the local Beastmen, the competition between nations for resources, and the responsibility to one's country via missions – set up a narrative of nationalism. The dark, vile "other" and lecherous, deceitful player-peers must both be stopped to secure and safeguard the borders of one's homeland. The game facilitates these three discourses

through the mechanics of "Conquest," and then repeats similar game mechanics through "Besieged" and "Campaigns."

Conquest refers to a convergence of multiple in-game mechanics that are oriented around Vana'diel's countries' cold-war battle for control of land. Players work to secure domination over various regions of Vana'diel for their home countries, and the level of influence is calculated at the end of each week to determine which country gains control over that land. Players can most easily engage in Conquest by speaking with their countries' guards and receiving the "Signet status," which allows players to add points to their country's influence in a region as they battle monsters and Beastmen. Unlike the other two forms of Conquest, Signet lets players participate in Conquest without much additional effort; they can engage in Conquest without derailing their leveling-up or mission-oriented work.

While Conquest through Signet is a more passive endeavor, Garrison and Expeditionary Force quests permit the player to engage in more direct, militaristic forms of Conquest. For a Garrison quest, a player trades an item to a representative at an outpost in a country-controlled region and then battles waves of Beastmen alongside a team of player-friendly NPCs. Alliances of one to three parties, each with a maximum of six players, must work in tandem with these NPCs to hold off an increasingly challenging onslaught of enemy Beastmen. Besieged quests, part of the *Treasures of Aht Urhgan* (Square-Enix, 2006) expansion pack, replicate this sort of gameplay by having players defend another country, the Empire of Aht Urhgan, from Beastman attack, though it constructs the battles as something closer to capture-the-flag. That is, in Garrison quests, if the outpost is taken, you lose; in Besieged, if the "Astral Candescence" item is stolen from the fortress Al Zahbi, you must get it back. Despite these nuanced mechanical differences, both share a similar structure of defending the societies of the children of Altana from the evils of outside Beastmen forces.

While Garrison and Besieged simulate the experience of being attacked, Expeditionary Force quests are about overtaking a Beastman outpost. Players, again, organize in a party of six or an alliance of up to three parties to target and destroy outposts in Beastmen-controlled regions. Expeditionary Forces simulate the experience seek-and-destroy missions. Parties can attack multiple outposts, which relocate and respawn after each destructive attack, during a single expedition. The more outposts that are destroyed, the more influence a country has over that region.

Because of the game's economics, engaging in the colonizing endeavors of Conquest has personal relevance to the individual. Players need stronger and consistently-updated equipment to progress through the game. Garrison and Expeditionary Force rewards aid the player in this desire for better equipment. Success in Signet Conquest gives players crystals to manufacture better equipment. As a player's country takes over more regions, merchants sell better crafting goods to make armors and weapons from scratch. As players battle and traverse through *Final Fantasy XI's* Conquest mechanics, they gain more resources and socio-political profit, which, in turn, funds the desire for better weapons and armor. The mechanics of *Final Fantasy XI*'s colonizing "Conquest" system are tightly interwoven into the personal economic lives of its players. Players are taught through engagement with these mechanics that colonization, territorial expansion, and economic competition have personal benefit for the individual, and, in turn, that the individual has a civic duty to engage in those endeavors

Pulling from James Paul Gee's (2008) theories on gaming and learning, the process through which the individual player comes to think of oneself as inseparable from the on-screen character through three interactive and reflexive identities creates a reality where the player is not just persuaded to believe something about colonization, a la Ian Bogost's (2007) procedural rhetorics, but in which the player is directly engaging in colonial warfare. Similar to performing a role in a play or in a movie, the person is not simply *watching* colonization; they are *enacting* it. While these colonizing mechanics are normalized and dismissed as "gameplay," this engagement with the destruction, pillaging, and attack on the voiceless "other" has a far greater impact on the psyche. This sort of gameplay arms a digital citizenry with active memories and strategies for garrison-defense, expeditionary conquest, and cold war. In a time when we have colonized much of the physical world, including the Moon, colonial practices make their way into the non-physical world of the game and the metaphysical world of the player's psyche.

Jackie Orr (2004) paints a picture of the effects of militarized media on civilian psyches in her examination of "The Militarization of Inner Space." While concerned with mass media and political influence on a militarized citizenry, her questioning of reshaped soldier-civilian borders offers an interesting parallel to the hybriditic projective identity at work in gameplay. The borders between U.S. soldiers and U.S. civilians became blurred in the wake of 9/11 and historically during post-World War II cold war America. Are we also witnessing a gameplay-mediated blurring of the borders between gamers and agents of colonization? What sort of ammo are we providing gamers through these cybernationalistic endeavors?

Moving our gaze beyond the potential ramifications for U.S. gamers, the psyches of Japanese youth, too, are being molded for military and political usage. In Japanese history textbook rewriting, which "set out to 'correct history' by emphasizing a 'positive view' of Japan's past" (Masalski, 2001), Japanese middle- and high-school youth are given a portrayal of World War II that eradicates the aggressive acts of Japan. According to Yoshifumi Tawara, Secretary General of the Children and Textbooks Japan Network21 (2007), this move to remove the aggressive history from Japan's collective memory was brought about by Japanese-U.S. military relations. In order to move the Japanese Self-Defense Force (JSDF), a limited military power created during post-World War II U.S. occupation, toward extra-local activities, Japanese conservative officials and intellectuals sought to construct a national consciousness that would envision Japan's involvement and activities in World War II, particularly in the Asia-Pacific War, as just. Tawara argues that this state desire to remake the JSDF into a military power arose out of collaboration with U.S. military officials, who encouraged Japan to prepare for Japan-U.S.-allied war.

It is then not difficult, I think, to realize that civilians, through media, education, and intercultural sites of gameplay, are routinely and procedurally subject to militarization and colonial efforts. While Orr, Masalski, and Tawara all point to discursive shifts in the militarization of citizens, *Final Fantasy XI* – which does not stand alone among video games – continues to arm players with tools and lived experiences of military warfare, and I think that rather than continue to resist the dominant "video games are violent" rhetoric by ignoring the issue, we should instead focus our attention on the injustices of the *types* of violence enacted, supported, and propagated by games. We should be less concerned about the at-face-value of violence, which is not unique to the video game medium, and instead shift our attention to the procedural rhetorics and interplay of gamer identities in colonial and militarized violence in games like *Final Fantasy XI*.

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